

September 2021

Executive  
Summary

# RESOURCING RESILIENT GLOUCESTERSHIRE:

Learning from the Community  
Response to the COVID-19  
Pandemic in Gloucestershire

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**W**hen the COVID-19 pandemic struck in March 2020, the UK Government took the unprecedented step of locking the country down and requesting that everyone ‘Stay at Home’. People’s lives were turned upside down, and everyday activities suddenly required significant logistical adjustments and emotional resources. Alongside an exceptional health emergency, a social crisis was also emerging.

For many, this was an introduction into life with restrictions, for many others the lockdown made an already restricted life harder, and for some, the sudden switch to remote working, digital medical appointments and growing community spirit opened the world up to them in ways that had previously not seemed possible.

Over the course of three months (January to March 2021), as the UK entered its third national lockdown, we interviewed 18 participants from 11 Gloucestershire-based community groups and organisations of various sizes about their experiences of responding throughout the pandemic.

Participants were asked about how they planned and delivered activities, the challenges they faced, and their work with volunteers, funders and commissioners.

We were particularly interested in the community contributions of disabled people and people with mental health challenges. There has been a great deal of focus on ‘vulnerability’



and how people experiencing barriers to participation in society prior to the pandemic have required additional support during this time, but less has been said about how those with an expertise in living with restriction have contributed to this community effort.

These interviews were revealing, not only about the ways in which groups and organisations responded, but also about Gloucestershire before the pandemic. This summary shares key learning and action points from these conversations.

The following sections describe the key findings from the study including what contributes to resilience, how that resilience can be built and sustained, and how resilience in Gloucestershire can be resourced.

### Key areas of learning included:



# What contributes to resilient communities?

## Local People

The resilience of communities in Gloucestershire has been tested in ways not experienced since the widespread flooding that occurred in 2007 which left many people homeless and thousands without water for almost two weeks. However, it was evident from the interviews that participants felt local people had risen to this challenge: developing solutions that aimed to ensure their neighbours were not left without support.



### Existing Capacity within Communities

People were able to quickly mobilise to support their communities. They were said to already have the capacity to self-organise, to reach out, and to do what was needed without delay or extensive planning.



### Strengths and Skills within Communities

Participants drew attention to the multitude of strengths and skills local people brought with them and of the importance of recognising that these skills are everywhere. Identifying, valuing and drawing on them as a resource was felt to be essential to the benefit of everyone.



### Individual People as Catalysts for Community Action

Individuals who were already heavily involved in their communities (e.g. through the parish council or by writing the village newsletter) were able to catalyse action where they lived.



### Building Community Capacity through Time-Giving

Organisations reflected that people suddenly had time on their hands, they wanted company or to help their family, friends, and neighbours, and they wanted to support systems in their time of need.



### Flexible and Inclusive Approach to Time-Giving

How an individual offered their time was described as being equally important to what occurred within the time. Flexible and less formal models of volunteering were felt to allow for more genuine mutuality and the creation of conditions where everyone can contribute their strengths and skills.



### Valuing People's Strengths and Skills

Respondents described the need to both encourage and value strengths and skills and the people who possess them. The more a person is valued for time given to the community, the more that person values their community and is more willing to invest time and energy to it.

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## Existing Infrastructure

From what we were told, the notable difference in the speed with which the groups we interviewed could co-ordinate their response was the existing community infrastructure. Established community organisations reflected that the processes required to manage a local support system in crisis were already in place for more provincial or small-scale emergencies, so with the foundation of action laid, all that was required to respond to a global pandemic was to elevate practiced processes to a new level. In these situations, local relationships and knowledge were key.



### Organisational Expertise

Organisations had spent many years developing community working practices, establishing strong, trusting relationships with local people, and amassing a wealth of expertise about their local area. These organisations were able to enhance the reactive community efforts with their strategic knowledge and oversight to help co-ordinate and maximise the use of resources in a local area.



### Trust

Greater trust in community organisations by statutory organisations and local decision-makers, we were told, would allow them to work most flexibly and effectively.



### Hyperlocal Focus

The view was shared that local communities already hold many of the answers to crises. Some participants reflected that taking a hyperlocal perspective, utilising local expertise and connections, could provide greater long-term sustainability and allow them to have meaningful contact with more people than organisations with a broader geographic remit.



### Informal Networks

Participants shared multiple examples of how the connections held within communities could enhance the response on the ground, including the distribution of resources and, often, who in those communities could be reached.



### Reaching Different Groups

Engaging with existing connections was just one way that communities reached out during the pandemic response. Whilst digital access was recognised as a barrier to connecting with some people, it was also considered to be a vital resource. However, the personal touch was said to be equally important, and many participants spoke of the significance of a leaflet through the door.

I think there is a huge risk that if organisations such as (ours) weren't there, you know, to be putting their arms around the mutual aid groups and you're offering that kind of support, then I actually think when we hit lockdown two in November, there wouldn't have been established relationships and, you know, between community activists and the local community, those relationships wouldn't have been there, the volunteers that were involved in that quite likely would have suffered volunteer fatigue and moved away from what they were doing...goodness knows how in lockdown three in January the community would have coped...the whole sort of community emphasis wouldn't have been there.



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## Approach and Ethos

The groups and organisations we spoke to were keen to tell us how their approach and ethos differed from more traditional public service provision. They described being both resident and community focused, seeking to ensure local people were given the opportunity to do things for themselves.



### Resident-Orientated, Community-Centred Ethos

Several organisations told us how they were careful not to impose their own thoughts and feelings of what the community might need. Instead, they were keen to step back, actively listen to what residents were saying and develop responses and activities in ways that communities said were needed.



### Flexible and Responsive Approach

The need to be flexible and responsive was said to be paramount to a resident-orientated, community-centred ethos. Flexibility in terms of what support is offered ensured individual and community needs were always being taken into consideration.



### Collaborative Ways of Working

Drawing on networks and the connections of others was reported to have enhanced the offer these groups could make to their communities during this crisis. Collaboration was felt to have improved their reach and supported the design of resident-orientated and community-centred activities and initiatives.



“We’re not just one organisation, we’re not just on our own, there are a lot of others...there’s a lot of support out there.”

# Looking Ahead – A blueprint for a more resilient Gloucestershire

Respondents reported a feeling that the pandemic has already triggered significant shifts in the way communities have operated, as local people have felt re-empowered to make decisions and develop schemes that suit their needs. The pandemic, whilst a source of pain and uncertainty for many, has also created an opportunity to rethink how services, organisations and local people interact and work together to sustain one another.

**The interviews identified three important considerations to allow community capacity and resilience to grow and thrive in Gloucestershire communities:**

## 1 Community Leadership

**The organisations we spoke to recognised the important role they played within the communities in which they were embedded:**

- Some were advocates, securing resources and recognition for local people, groups and organisations.
- Some were the focal point of a community: the social centre, advice hub or safe space, and
- Some were the conduit for people's energy and need to help others, providing some direction and co-ordination to ensure as many people were reached as possible.

**In terms of sustaining and building more resilient communities in the future respondents identified that community leaders should:**

- Be recognised by all for the critical ongoing role they play in nurturing, enabling, holding and mobilising community responses
- Consider their organisational and personal boundaries, where they are best placed to support and when external expertise is required.

## 2 Readiness

We were told by some of the more established organisations that their engagement with residents over a period of years, and well before the pandemic, was fundamental to ensuring communities were ready to respond to crises big or small.

Several organisations spoke of how this readiness was enhanced where groups and organisations were already working collaboratively with statutory services and each other.

**In terms of sustaining and building more resilient communities in the future, readiness was said to be about:**

- Ensuring the grassroots connections are in place.
- Enabling local people to organise themselves autonomously.
- Establishing trusting connections between local people, organisations, and local decision-makers, across civil society.

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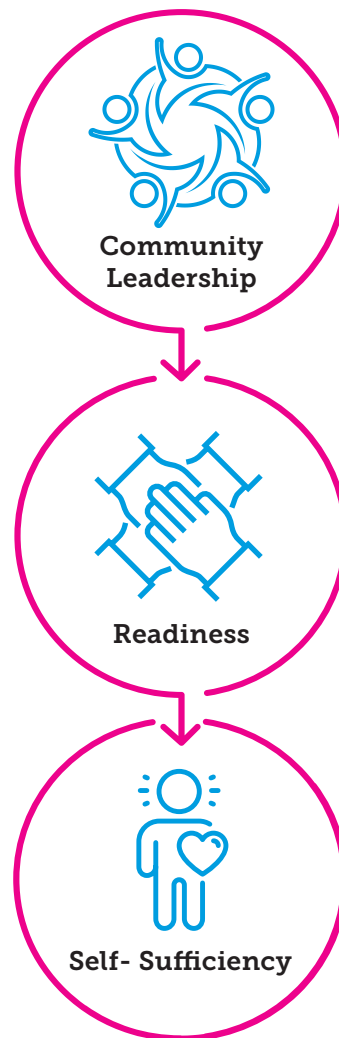
## Self-Sufficiency

Organisations also stressed the importance of communities being not just ready for crises but actively developing self-sufficiency.

One organisation described how helplessness and dependency are perpetuated by systems that disempower communities. By changing these systems to work with communities, local people can increase self-sufficiency, build their capacity to solve local issues and ultimately become more resilient.

**In terms of sustaining and building more resilient communities in the future, self-sufficiency was said to be about:**

- Changing systems to work with not for, nor doing to, communities.
- Consider the unintended consequences of investment in communities: what is already being done here that could be amplified, and are local people involved in deciding about how that investment should be made?



**If commissioners put more weight into the opinions and the values of anchor organisations I would think...they'd be able to commission stuff better that supports communities rather than what we've seen (for decades)... is commissioning services it replicates community effort and ultimately leads to learned helplessness and learned hopelessness and this feeling that you have no power in the place that you live and the decisions that impact your life.**



# Funding Resilient Communities

In terms of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we heard how the three areas above (local people, existing infrastructure and organisations’ approach and ethos) affected the urgency, scale, and approach of the community response, including its effectiveness and its sustainability.

When local people are involved and valued, local knowledge considered, and resident-orientated and collaborative ways of working are adopted, we were told that communities felt better prepared and more able to thrive in the face of the crisis.

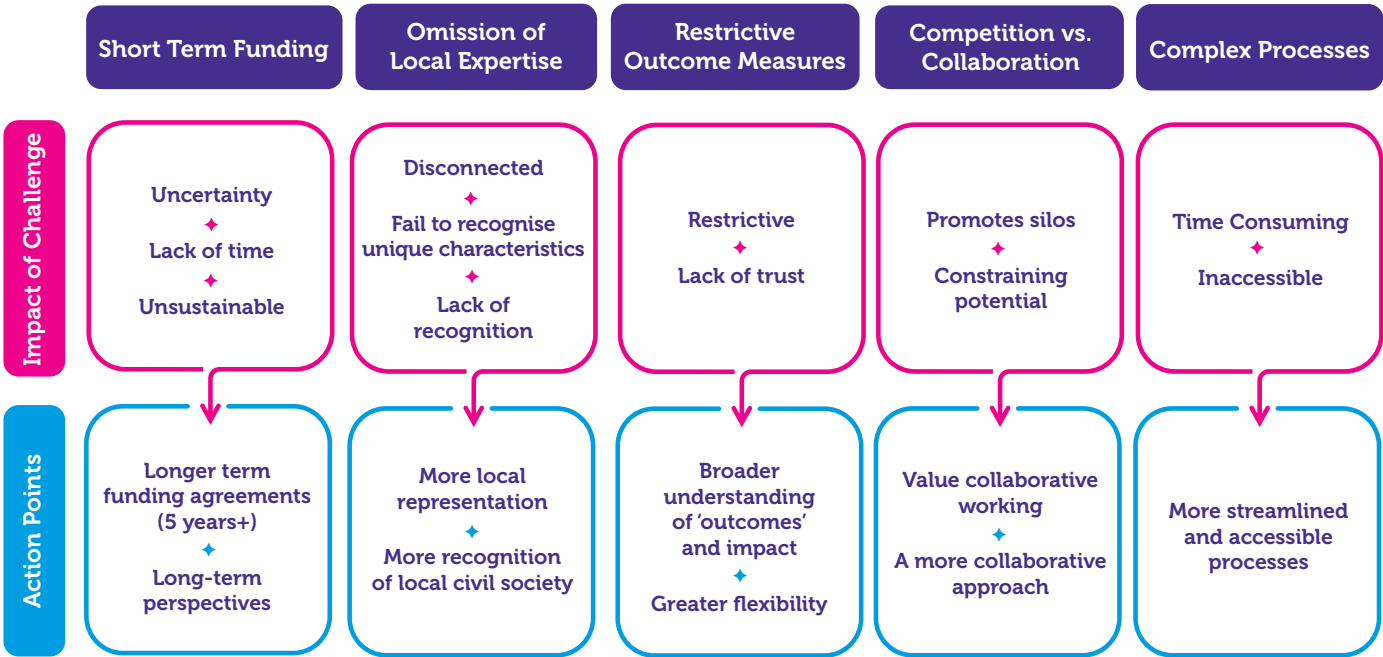
We also heard, however, how the nature of funding and commissioning processes

in the county can pose challenges which participants felt could restrict what can be achieved.

**All participants noted five core challenges within these processes which impacted on the work they were able to deliver:**

- Short-term funding
- The omission of local expertise
- Restrictive outcome measures
- An emphasis on competition over collaboration
- Complex processes

The following graphic describes each of these challenges in more detail and the actions participants felt could be taken going forwards:



## Funding/Commissioning Response to COVID-19

Whilst these challenges are ongoing, participants shared how, during the initial emergency, the funding and commissioning systems had adapted.

**Participants told us how this had the following benefits:**

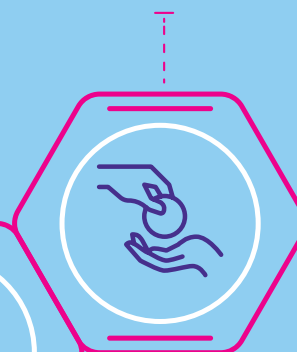
**More core funding was available to ensure organisations' immediate financial security.**



**There were fewer restrictions on how funding could be used by organisations.**



**Approaches to funding and commissioning were more collaborative.**



**Communities were trusted to know what was needed and where.**



**Processes were streamlined and lines of communication to funders became more open.**



**Participants were united in asking for one thing of funders and commissioners going forward:**

Sustain the trust in them that has already been given to allow them to work flexibly and with greater autonomy.

# Action Points for Resilient Gloucestershire

The COVID-19 pandemic will not be the last crisis to affect Gloucestershire communities and a core aim of the research was to identify key areas of learning so that the county can be fully prepared for the next one.

**The following action points are intended for discussion and consideration in the creation of a countywide culture in which resilience, trust, autonomy, collaboration, and sustainability are at the forefront:**



Recognise and value the innate capacity of everyone within communities: their connections, experiences, strengths and skills. This is to nurture the conditions for independent decision-making by local people, mutual benefit for people and organisations, and commonality of purpose for all in a community.



Adopt ways of working that strengthen co-ordinated leadership by actively listening to local voices about issues that impact them, utilising hyperlocal knowledge and networks, and in ways that are flexible to the unique characteristics of each community.



Foster a culture of flexibility in which openness, trust, and collaboration are intrinsic elements of working with communities. Be supportive of resident-led action and of approaches that focus on both local people and the community as a whole, and tailor initiatives to the unique needs and preferences of an area.



Prepare for future crises by collaborating with communities to identify local leadership, integral spaces (such as community hubs) and planning for community-led, self-sustaining responses that build upon their experiences of COVID-19.



Develop funding and commissioning processes that are flexible, streamlined and collaborative. Build trusting relationships with partners with a clear focus on long-term and sustainable impacts rather than solely on quantitative deliverables.

**If you would like to find out more about this research, please contact:**

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